

BOOK REVIEW

Occult Aesthetics: Wish-figures of the Unconscious in the Work of Albert von Schrenck-Notzing by Timon L. Kuff. Gießen, Germany: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2011. 545 pp. £39.40. ISBN 978-3837921366.

Thomas Mann's Ghost Baron: Life and Work of Baron Albert Von Schrenck-Notzing by Manfred Dierks. Gießen, Germany: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2012. 366 pp. £23.60. ISBN 978-3898068116.

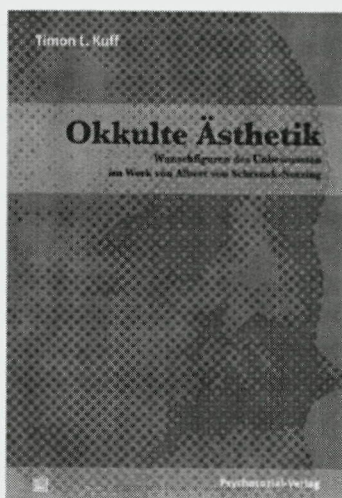
The physician, sexologist, and psychical researcher Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929) was one of the most unusual and controversial figures in the history of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century German medicine and science. As a young student, he sought—together with his one-time mentor Carl du Prel, the philosopher–psychologist Max Dessoir, and others—to expand the methodological and epistemological scope of fledgling German professionalized psychology by serving as an important conduit for strands of psychological experimentation from France and England as alternatives to the physiologically grounded experimental psychology of Wilhelm Wundt and its offshoots (Kurzweg 1976, Sommer 2013). An early leading proponent of sexology and medical hypnotism, his work was well-received inside and outside Germany by authors such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Albert Moll, Sigmund Freud (with whom he had studied hypnotism under Bernheim in the 1880s), Auguste Forel, Morton Prince, and Havelock Ellis (e.g., Gauld 1992, Sommer 2012a, Sulloway 1992). After obtaining economic independence by marrying into one of the richest families in Germany, he abandoned his promising medical career and began to focus his energies on the study of the most controversial and disputed area of psychical research: physical mediumship. Thanks to his immense wealth and former academic credentials, shortly after World War I Schrenck-Notzing began to dominate German psychical research and became its doyen and sponsor.

Schrenck's unorthodox investigations brought upon him the wrath of his previous comrade in arms in medical hypnotism and sexology, Albert Moll, as well as a network of other self-appointed guardians of “science” and “reason” who publicly castigated Schrenck for what they viewed as his attempts to contaminate German science with dangerous “superstitions” (on these controversies, see Sommer 2012a, Wolfram 2006). Instrumental

in these campaigns was the utilization of popular traditional Enlightenment sentiments, which labelled the believer in phenomena traditionally considered "occult" or "supernatural" inherently irrational, epistemically vulgar, and downright psychopathological. Irrespective of interpretations of reported occult phenomena as natural rather than supernatural by most investigating them and testifying to their reality, Moll and other militant opponents of psychical research, such as the lawyer Albert Hellwig and the psychiatrist Mathilde von Kemnitz (who later became known as the Nazi occultist Mathilde von Ludendorff),

considered the very belief in their empirical possibility to be a dangerous mental pathogen. Like a parasitic evil spirit, belief in the reality of occult phenomena supposedly took hold of and controlled the victim, transforming rational beings into dangerous carriers of contagious pathological folly and error which, Moll and colleagues feared, threatened to overthrow the very foundations of modern culture and civilization. Thus, Moll's public war against his former colleague culminated in a posthumous "diagnosis" just weeks after Schrenck's death, describing the freshly deceased as the prototype of one suffering from an "occult complex" resulting from the dangerous will to believe in an occult occurrence (Moll 1929).

The pathologization of those holding "dangerous beliefs" was of course not invented by Moll. When Immanuel Kant, for example, diagnosed Emanuel Swedenborg and other "enthusiasts" and "mystics" as lunatics (Kant [1766] 1925, [1790] 1873), he was looking back on an already long tradition of declaring epistemic and religious deviance ("enthusiasm") a disease. When psychologists in America and elsewhere repudiated psychical research contra William James as the "father" of the new profession (who advocated unrestrictedly empirical studies of telepathy, mediumship, and other debated phenomena as legitimate fields of scientific psychology), they were likewise generous with attributions of interest in the "occult" as inherently pathological.¹ Hence, in response to a review by his psychological colleague James McKeen Cattell of a study of the mediumship of Leonora Piper, James, having identified serious misrepresentations of the reviewed report by Cattell, complained, "In our dealings with the insane the usual moral rules don't apply. Mediums are scientific outlaws, and their defendants



are quasi-insane. Any stick is good enough to beat dogs of that stripe with" (James 1898:641).

Both works under review, issued by a young publishing house specializing in psychological and psychoanalytical literature, continue to promulgate the image of Schrenck as constructed by Moll and other militant opponents of unrestrictedly empirical approaches to reported psychic phenomena. Kuff's study, which was his doctoral thesis in *Bildwissenschaft* (visual culture studies), is the heftier tome, although it focuses on Schrenck's experiments with Eva C. (Marthe Béraud; first published in 1914 as *Materialisationsphaenomene*) and his famous photographs of "ectoplasm" (Schrenck used the term "teleplasm"), almost completely neglecting subsequent works by Schrenck. According to the blurb on the back cover,

Kuff reveals the complicated semantic status of the image in its double function as a scientific document and map [*Abbild*] of a performative expression theatre. Thus, the biological, philosophical, and aesthetical references which Schrenck meant to establish are rendered visible. In the conjunction of intellectual biography and historical discourse analysis the aesthetic delimitation of images are being traced and an exemplary analysis of that occult aesthetics is executed.

I suppose the advertisement alone will hardly entice *JSE* readers to brush up on their German and read the book. Of greater interest, however, may be the author's promise to have obtained "a new perspective on the interaction between medium and experimenter" (p. 15) and "a cautious interpretation of the motives which drove those involved to conduct these experiments" (p. 19). Unfortunately, the "new perspective" is about as novel as that adopted in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and the interpretation of motives of psychical researchers as "cautious" and sensitive as the methods applied by the proverbial Spanish Inquisition (no reference to Pythonesque re-enactments involving comfy chairs intended). Relying on the most simplistic and popularist science myths imaginable, like the journalist Ruth Brandon (1983, whom Kuff cites frequently) before him, the author skews his portrayal of Schrenck by adopting an axiom according to which the medium is a fraud and the psychical researcher a fool, slogging the objects of his study to fit his own unreflected presuppositions. For according to Kuff, Schrenck's work was sheer "madness" (p. 499) and an "anti-modern soul-hunt [*Seelenfängerei*]," which is why it was "not a tragic misjudgement but a necessary corollary" that it was never accepted by science (p. 501).

The guiding idea of the study is, after all, an absolutely uncritical acceptance of notions related to that dangerous "will to believe" in the

miraculous that supposedly instantly cripples any critical faculties in its victims. Praising Albert Moll as "one of the first to clearly recognize that it was superfluous to ponder the fraudulent character of the phenomena unless the inner motivation of those involved was clearly fathomed" (p. 352), Kuff credits the leading populariser of the "new psychology" in America, Joseph Jastrow, with the actual discovery of the occult complex, obviously believing the use of the term by professional psychologists and physicians denoted a discrete, evidence-based clinical entity rather than a rhetorical device to keep the occult out of professionalized psychology and medical hypnotism. Kuff reveals that he simply snapped up the term without studying the historical context of its emergence when making the absurd claim that Jastrow (whom Kuff falsely refers to as a representative of psychoanalysis, p. 382) arrived at the idea "following William James's psychology of religion and Freudian psychoanalysis" (p. 360). As evidence, Kuff quotes an equally embarrassing claim by one of Schrenck's opponents, Carl von Klinckowstroem, who pronounced that the "will to believe (according to William James) is the characteristic of primitive thinking" (quoted on p. 360), when in reality James's "will to believe" encapsulated his passionate defence of the individual's *right* to believe in transcendental realities even in the absence of conclusive evidence as long as such belief served a constructive function (James 1897, 1911). Moreover, rather than adopting contemporary standard anthropological explanations of belief in the supernatural as an atavistic survival from a primitive stage of human development, James explicitly rejected such views (e.g., James 1902: Chapter 10).

Rather than assessing functions of pathological belief claims in the context of the professionalization of psychology (Jastrow) and the medicalization of hypnotism (Moll), Kuff in all seriousness employs them to not only perform a retroactive "diagnosis" of Schrenck-Notzing, but also as a framework for his theoretical analysis of Schrenck's famous photographs. In overblown and pop-psychoanalytical prose, Kuff emulates Moll by condemning Schrenck and psychical researchers at large for "portraying their badly camouflaged wishful fantasies [*Wunschvorstellungen*] as objective or matter-of-fact motivations, thus inevitably being not only spectators but, in their self-styled roles as investigators, becoming co-actors of the medium" (p. 281), and he asserts the tired stereotype that it was the crafty mediums who subtly manipulated the hopelessly naïve experimenters, leaving them in the mere illusion of being in charge of the experimental procedures (e.g., pp. 308–311). When contradicting his previous statements by mentioning examples of extraordinarily strict control which Schrenck sometimes pushed at the cost of Eva's well-being and dignity, Kuff simply

takes this as clear-cut proof that Schrenck gratified a sadistic fetishism by disciplining his medium like a circus animal (e.g., pp. 354–356). For the upshot of Kuff's analytical efforts is that the

disciplining [*Dressur*] of Eva C. over years could encash for Schrenck that which life in the middle-class straightjacket denied to him: Delimitation fantasies could be acted out and fixated medially. Through sophisticated technical-optical apparatuses it was possible to photographically capture the wild, convulsive modes of expression displayed by the medium during the 'mediumistic labour-pains'. To exert control: This became the actual fetish for Schrenck, which was and is explainable not only—all too one-dimensionally and rationally—through demands of 'control for fraud'. Those manifest limits did not exist, for the fantasies remained all too obviously literally limitless in the realm of non-explicable physical mediumship, which also explains the aesthetic value (or lack thereof) of the pictures produced in this sequence of operations. (p. 367)

For the author, therefore, to a significant degree "the history [or story: *Geschichte*] of the *Phenomena of Materialisation* is also that of Schrenck-Notzing's compulsion neurosis," and Schrenck's experiments with Eva C. a "compositum mixtum of a psychopathological Punch and Judy show [*Kasperletheater*] for adults and camouflaged sexual passion" (p. 487).

A further example of Kuff's willingness to buy into the populist propaganda of Schrenck's antagonists is the (supposedly damning) claim that Schrenck was a spiritist. While in an entry on Schrenck in a recent biographical dictionary of sexology it was simply declared that "his spiritistic studies satisfied the need for metaphysical solace" (Kuff 2009:642), he now acknowledges that Schrenck adopted an explicitly non- and at times anti-spiritistic approach to mediumship, but maintains (again without qualification) that this was but a rhetorical strategy to camouflage his supposedly perverse activities as "science." Again uncritically parroting Moll (whose equally vitriolic attacks on Freud Kuff is strangely oblivious to), he maintains that the proof for Schrenck's secret spiritism lay in the fact that his experiments preserved the outward setting and milieu of the séance room (e.g., pp. 158, 169), dismissing Schrenck's studies as "a scientifically masked, technically bootied-up [*technisch hochgefahrenener*], and quite materialistic spiritism" (p. 498). This, Kuff explains, was the reason Schrenck's *Phenomena of Materialisation* "was never accepted as an experimental-psychological or psychoanalytical reference work [*Grundlagenwerk*]" (pp. 178–179), curiously contrasting it with Théodore Flournoy's famous study of the (mental) mediumship of the Genovese medium Catherine Elise Müller ("Hélène Smith"), which Kuff anachronistically refers to as "psychoanalytical-linguistic" (p. 184). What

Kuff neglects to mention, however, is that Flournoy (who surely would have taken issue with a characterization of his work as "psychoanalytical") also studied his automatist in her natural environment; that he candidly reported instances of apparently supernormal cognition which could easily be interpreted in favour of the "spirit hypothesis;" that Flournoy (a correspondent and occasional co-investigator with Schrenck in the study of physical mediumship) was convinced of the reality of physical phenomena, and, moreover, that he protested vehemently against certain methods and sweeping claims routinely used by polemical antagonists of psychical research (Flournoy [1899] 1994:Chapter 10).

Chapter 6 bears the subtitle "The phenomena of materialisation in historical context," but neither there nor anywhere else in the book do we find the slightest attempt to actually contextualise Schrenck's work or understand it through an analysis of the extensive medical and scientific networks he was a member of before and after abandoning his medical career. Instead, the author extends his tiring finger-wagging exercise to include Schrenck's early work in sexology, for Kuff singles out Schrenck (rather than Krafft-Ebing, Moll, or Forel) for his anachronistic accusations of late-nineteenth century sexologists operating according to paradigms and practices of their time rather than ours (e.g., p. 61), i.e. the pathologization (rather than, as previously, criminalization) of homosexuality and other sexual "deviations."

Less explicitly accusatory than Kuff, *Thomas Mann's Ghost Baron* by Manfred Dierks (a Mann scholar and professor for modern German literary studies) still equally testifies to the lasting impact of imperial and interwar German anti-occultism campaigns as launched by Moll and other self-appointed Great Inquisitors of popular science. Lacking an introduction or preface, the reader is left confused regarding the objectives and genre of the curious literary exercise, which reads like a historical novel at times (Dierks constructs dialogues in direct speech and has his protagonists shrug, nod, rave, and grin) and a playful comment on imperial and interwar German culture at others. In contrast to Kuff, Dierks conducted extensive archival research, unearthing interesting details, particularly concerning Schrenck's youth in Oldenburg, his later involvement in his father-in-law's business affairs, conflicts with other psychical researchers dissatisfied with his monopolizing the field in Germany, and his reception by key figures in Munich high society. Unfortunately, however, inconsistent referencing often makes it impossible to assess whether claims and interpretations are based on historical evidence or on the author's imagination. To give a comparatively unimportant example, Dierks maintains that Max Dessoir was Schrenck's best man at his wedding (pp. 124, 154, 303) but fails to

back up this unlikely assertion—according to Dessoir's memoirs (Dessoir 1947:130), he attended Schrenck's wedding, but considering the somewhat troubled history of the men it is almost inconceivable that he was his best man. Problems increase when the narrative fundamentally questions Schrenck's integrity and sanity as it does in almost every chapter through dramatized reconstructions of scenes and dialogues, one-sidedly relying on accusations and innuendo by his manifold antagonists.

With his expertise on Thomas Mann (who wrote a famous essay on his experiences with Schrenck's medium Willy Schneider (Mann 1924)) as a starting point, Dierks looks at parts of Schrenck's career as a sexologist, exploring, for instance, whether Mann might have consulted Schrenck to hypnotically "correct" his homosexuality (pp. 173–176). Mentioning Schrenck's links to Eugen Bleuler and Carl G. Jung (pp. 342–344), Dierks misses an opportunity to explore these networks further. Instead, through his unquestioning reliance on an outdated popular understanding of the history of science in the simplistic terms of a heroic march from error to knowledge, and a resulting unhelpful dichotomy of orthodox (i.e., professionalized) science versus unorthodox "pseudoscience," his perspective is laden with a pre-interpretation of Schrenck and some of his collaborators as self-deluded scientific outsiders and quasi-pathological saboteurs of scientific progress regularly engaging in acts of intellectual dishonesty and rhetorical self-immunization (pp. 183–184, 237–238), and, like Kuff, he seems to accept as gospel almost any accusation ever leveled against Schrenck by Moll and other antagonists.

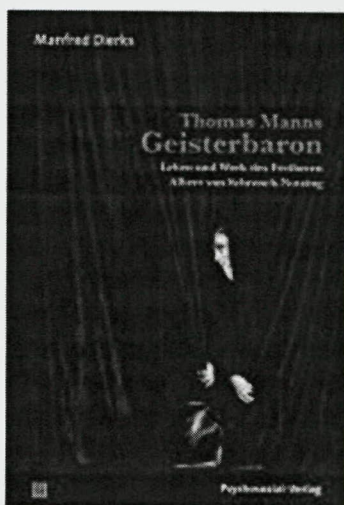
For instance, like Kuff (Chapter 4) the author condemns Schrenck for supposedly continuing certain traditions of Romantic medicine with its strong links to animal magnetism and various forms of vitalism, which Dierks seems to consider as inherently irrational and positively refuted on empirical grounds. Here he strictly adheres to conservative popular historiographies of Romantic science and medicine as manufactured particularly by mid- to late-nineteenth century pioneers of professionalized physiology with heavy metaphysical axes to grind, such as Hermann Helmholtz, Emil du Bois-Reymond, and Carl Vogt. Unaware of advances in the history of science scholarship addressing pertinent developments in scientific culture from the Enlightenment onwards, Dierks grounds, and thus fundamentally limits, his perspective in simplistic terms of progressiveness ("When medicine pushed itself away from its Romantic foundations and began to view itself as exact natural science, it saw itself obliged to follow the epistemological principles of the Enlightenment," (pp. 74)).² Dierks reveals his grasp of Romantic primary sources by claiming, for instance, that among early-nineteenth century philosophers it was only Schopenhauer who accepted the reality of animal magnetism (p. 25), whereas it was—along with its "mystical"

components, i.e. alleged clairvoyance and thought transference—embraced and studied not only by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, but also by eminent Romantic natural philosophers such as the inventor of a prototype of the modern battery, Johann Wilhelm Ritter, and the discoverer of electromagnetism, Hans Christian Ørsted.

Oblivious, like Kuff, to the continuity of “occult” interests in members of the German intellectual elite (such as the founder of psychophysics, Gustav Theodor Fechner), which has been thoroughly obscured by “enlightened” conservative histories of science, Dierks dips into the history of modern psychology. Mentioning Schrenck’s network of important pre-Freudian theorists of the unconscious such as Pierre Janet, Carl du Prel, and Frederic Myers (the latter of whom he oddly refers to as a “harsh opponent of spiritism,” (p. 91), his reliance on conservative historiographies of modern psychology and its relationship to psychical research, however, appears to have prevented him from consulting studies demonstrating strong links particularly between pre-Freudian psychologists of the unconscious and psychical research (e.g., Brower 2010, Crabtree 1993, Ellenberger 1970, Gauld 1992, Kelly et al. 2007, Plas 2000, Shamdasani 1993, 2003, Sommer 2011).

Moreover, Dierks retroactively (de-)constructs Schrenck’s entire career by bluntly projecting the most unflattering and hostile characterizations by interwar antagonists on his early days. Hence, according to Dierks’s depiction, Schrenck’s supposed scientific downfall was predetermined by a narcissistic megalomania, flamboyant hedonism, sleazy prurience, and cowardice. Schrenck’s motivations to promote medical hypnotism as a student, for instance, are reduced to a narcissistic impulse and lust for manipulation (“As a hypnotist, he savours that which this role gains him: the power over others, the pride of the own strong will” (p. 119; see also pp. 29, 30)).

The portrayal of psychical researchers as renitent, obnoxious enemies of reason is duly extended to Schrenck’s closest collaborators. Charles Richet, for example, is likened to a “mulish little boy, who will not accept a rebuke and who is deeply convinced of his own truth” (p. 236), and a discussion of Richet’s human shortcomings (such as his disturbing racism, e.g., pp. 224,



238–40) also appears calculated to discourage a sympathetic stance toward the later Nobel Prize laureate's unorthodox scientific activities. Gustave Geley (who receives a good bashing from Kuff as well) is referred to as a former assistant of Charcot, who, however, "had strayed into spiritism, but who knew how to obscure his superstition" (p. 297). Schrenck's links to the biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch are sweepingly explained by Schrenck's accepting Driesch's neo-vitalism to promote his "unscientific" experiments and Driesch's vouching for Schrenck to bolster his "reactionary" theories of morphology (pp. 286–290). Another collaborator of Schrenck's who was highly regarded in his time, the Tübingen philosopher Traugott Konstantin Oesterreich, receives more respectful treatment (pp. 290–294)—perhaps because Oesterreich was rarely the subject of aggressive attacks in newspapers and popular magazines, and because he was even more oppressed by the Nazis than Driesch.

In this regard, Dierks provides interesting insights into the future career of Mathilde von Kemnitz as the Nazi occultist Mathilde von Ludendorff (pp. 245, 316–319), but again forfeits an opportunity to explore some of the manifold and often mutually antagonistic quarters and networks in imperial and interwar German culture which were so passionately hostile to psychical research and instrumental in fundamentally biasing its public image and academic reception in the press. Moreover, Dierks neglects to take a closer look at some of the arguments and concerns of another of Schrenck's most scientifically eminent supporters, Eugen Bleuler, who forcefully defended Schrenck from what he viewed as unfair and shallow knee-jerk polemics camouflaged as scientific criticisms (Bleuler 1926, 1930, 1933). Similarly, Dierks could have tested popular standard interpretations of psychical researchers as intrinsically motivated by irrational and regressive impulses by studying in some detail Schrenck's correspondence and collaboration with other individuals who could hardly be thus characterized—at least in the simplistic standards of popular science adhered to so strictly by both Kuff and Dierks. For example, during his archival research in the Schrenck papers at the IGPP Freiburg, Dierks must have seen the correspondence with Hans Hahn, a member of the Vienna Circle of logical positivism, who investigated (with Schrenck and colleagues in Austria) poltergeist phenomena and even served as vice-president of the Austrian Society for Psychical Research.³

What both Kuff's and Dierks's approaches most fundamentally lack in historical–methodological terms is at least rudimentary sympathy and respect for their unorthodox protagonists, and, most of all, symmetry, perspective, and context. This is not to claim that Schrenck was free from blemishes and errors. To reduce any historical actor to their supposed and real human faults and

scientific mistakes without even attempting to provide a fair balance, however, is a method that may be considered as befitting politicians, but not scholars.

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Notes

- ¹ On the desperate need for early professional American psychologists to demarcate the “new psychology” from psychical research, see, e.g., Coon (1992) and Sommer (2012b).
- ² For important revisions of traditional views of Romanticism as inherently irrational or even “anti-scientific,” see, e.g., Cunningham & Jardine (1990) and Beiser (2003). Nuanced reconsiderations of the traditional view of the Enlightenment as the age of tolerance and progress, are, e.g., Porter (1990) and Outram (1995). On the metaphysical backdrop of the emergence of anti-Romantic scientific materialism and reductionism in nineteenth century Germany, see Gregory (1977) and Wittkau-Horgby (1998). The concrete political dimensions of the belief in “miraculous” phenomena in imperial Germany and elsewhere have been studied, by Blackbourn (1993), Porter (1999), and Freytag (2003, 2004).
- ³ A more prominent member of the Vienna Circle, Rudolf Carnap, was also interested in parapsychological phenomena—apparently much to the dismay of Otto Neurath and Ludwig Wittgenstein (Neurath & Cohen 1973:43). I’m grateful to Gerd Hövelmann for referring me to Carnap’s first-hand statement regarding this matter (Carnap [1963] 1993:42).

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